

Immigrant's story of hardship, love, deportation

Sunday, August 23, 2009

By Jerome L. Sherman, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

<http://www.post-gazette.com/pg/09235/992679-455.stm>

In a moment, the somber meeting became celebratory.

Sister Janice Vanderneck, Dianne Burnham and Anya Martin sat together at Panera Bread in Oakland in October, preparing to tell 18-year-old Stephany McMullen that they had failed to raise \$10,000 to bail out her boyfriend, Milton Mejia, from an immigration detention center in El Paso, Texas.

Mr. Mejia, then 20, was awaiting deportation to his native Honduras.

Ms. Martin, a playwright who had met Ms. McMullen -- an immigrant from Venezuela -- and Mr. Mejia through a theater project with young Pittsburgh Latinos, wore waterproof mascara in anticipation of a tearful encounter.

But Ms. McMullen had her own announcement: Mr. Mejia's biology teacher from Pittsburgh Schenley High School had offered to put up the money. Mr. Mejia would soon be taking a 34-hour bus ride to Pittsburgh.

"It was like a 'Hallelujah moment' at a Pentecostal church," said Ms. Martin, 28.

Mr. Mejia still faces deportation, and he plans to return voluntarily to Honduras on Sept. 2.

But he will leave behind deep roots in Pittsburgh. He and Ms. McMullen -- now Mrs. Mejia -- married last month. He has a home-improvement job and dozens of close friends.

And Ms. Martin is working on a play based on his perilous journey in 2005, as a teenager, through Central America and Mexico into the United States.

A partial production of the play, called "El Camino," will take place Wednesday at the Grey Box Theatre in Lawrenceville. The invitation-only event is designed to solicit feedback, especially from Pittsburgh's small but growing Latino community.

It's also a chance to mark Mr. Mejia's contributions to his adopted home and to share the difficulties facing one of an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants who live in the United States.

"I think Milton has an incredible sense of responsibility to the power of stories, and the power of his story," Ms. Martin said.

The journey

From the beginning, life has been a series of obstacles and tragedies for Milton Mejia.

Born on Christmas Day 1988 in Siguatopeque, a small city in the central highlands of Honduras, Mr. Mejia lost a year when local officials accidentally recorded his birth date as Dec. 25, 1987.

His father died in a car crash a year later, and his mother, prompted by a series of nightmares, asked Mr. Mejia's grandmother to raise him.

When he was 11, Mr. Mejia would run with friends to catch a ride home on pickup trucks passing in front of his school. One day, he noticed his legs were losing strength and he couldn't keep pace. Someone helped pull him onto the back of a truck.

"The next day I couldn't make it to the truck," he said. "Then I couldn't go to school."

Mr. Mejia gradually lost the ability to walk.



The newlywed Mejias, Milton and Stephany -- Still facing deportation, Mr. Mejia plans to return voluntarily to Honduras on Sept. 2.

His grandmother took him to a hospital in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, and he was diagnosed with Guillain-Barre Syndrome, a disorder of the nervous system.

Eventually, the boy could move only his head. A doctor said his chances of survival were slim.

Through his hospital window, Mr. Mejia would catch a glimpse of a giant statue of Jesus that overlooks the city. It gave him strength.

He started receiving physical therapy. He learned how to roll, a process that made him feel like an infant again. Then he was on his knees. Within a month, he was walking.

When he returned to his hometown, Mr. Mejia went back to school and started building couches with his cousins.

But his grandmother had encountered financial problems. Her small coffee farm had helped pay for Mr. Mejia's medical bills, but she had to sell the farm because of a niece who defaulted on a loan.

Mr. Mejia and his cousins started talking about a 1,200-mile trip to the United States to find better jobs. Two cousins tried, but they were picked up in Mexico and deported back to Honduras.

Mr. Mejia was confident he could make it. His grandmother agreed to help raise the \$5,000 to pay a "coyote," or smuggler, who would guide him north.

In June 2005, he set out with a group of 60 immigrants, and the coyote brought them as far as Mexico's border with Guatemala. When Mexican immigration authorities closed in on them, the group scattered, and Mr. Mejia was on his own, with just a backpack, a Bible and \$1,000 in a hidden pocket on his belt.

Over the next several weeks, he crossed Mexico in buses, trucks and taxis. On the bus ride from Monterrey to Nuevo Laredo, a Mexican immigration official boarded to check documentation. A woman sitting next to him said Mr. Mejia was her nephew, even though the pair hadn't said a word to each other.

Mr. Mejia eventually found himself at the Rio Grande in Piedras Negras. He saw a U.S. flag on the other side. His 23-day journey was nearly over.

A few local men helped him cross the river. When he emerged on the other side, he was muddy, wet and standing on a golf course in Eagle Pass, Texas. Several golfers looked at him, and then went back to their game.

Mr. Mejia walked to a roadway. Within a few minutes, he was picked up by a border patrol agent.

A new life in Pittsburgh

Mr. Mejia spent his first three months in the United States in a Texas detention facility for juvenile immigrants. With the help of his grandmother, he discovered that he had a relative -- a woman whose sister was married to his uncle -- in Monroeville.

Officials with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agreed to release Mr. Mejia into his relative's custody, and all his court documents would be sent to her.

Mr. Mejia arrived at Pittsburgh International Airport in September 2005, and he spent three hours searching for an exit. He couldn't read the signs. When he finally found his way out, his relative was furious about the delay.

In a short period, she and her husband, a Navy officer, left the Pittsburgh area to live in Virginia, and Mr. Mejia stayed behind, working restaurant jobs and attending classes at Pittsburgh Allderdice High School.

He soon dropped out to support himself, but Mr. Mejia started to feel comfortable in his new city. His English improved rapidly.

Through a friend, he met Stephany McMullen. They quickly became close, and she and her mother even moved into his Friendship apartment for a brief period. Within a year, Mr. Mejia and Ms. McMullen were dating.

In 2007, he enrolled at Schenley High to complete his studies.

His maturity and intelligence impressed Autumn Iwanonkiw, his biology teacher. She soon learned that Mr. Mejia was living on his own and going to a job right after school. She would allow him to put his head

down in class and take short naps.

"He would just zip through the work," she said.

When Mr. Mejia and Ms. McMullen graduated last year, Ms. Iwanonkiw gave them her phone number and told them to call if they ever needed help.

They soon needed help.

In June 2008, Mr. Mejia was painting a house in West View with another man when two police officers showed up and asked what they were doing. Mr. Mejia's boss came to explain, which seemed to satisfy the officers.

But they returned a short while later -- a deportation order had been issued for Mr. Mejia. He had never responded to any court documents sent to the relative who had agreed to serve as his guardian.

Mr. Mejia was placed in handcuffs and taken to the Allegheny County Jail. Almost immediately, his growing support network in Pittsburgh started to act.

Ms. Iwanonkiw's husband went to visit Mr. Mejia, as did Ms. McMullen, who was devastated by the arrest.

"It was horrible," she said of their brief reunion at the jail. "I was crying the whole time."

The participants in Teatro Latino de Pittsburgh, the project organized by Ms. Martin for Hispanic teenagers, started a petition asking for Mr. Mejia's release. He had planned to appear in the group's final show.

Immigration authorities repeatedly transferred Mr. Mejia, taking him to Cambria and York counties, and then on to detention centers in New Mexico and Texas.

Jacqueline Martinez, a Pittsburgh immigration attorney, persuaded a judge to reopen Mr. Mejia's case and to set bond. The judge ordered Mr. Mejia to return to Honduras by next month, giving him and Ms. McMullen time to marry.

Ms. Iwanonkiw and her husband contacted a bail bond company that specializes in immigration cases. In October, Mr. Mejia came back to Pittsburgh.

Now, he and his new wife are trying to make the most of the short time they have together. They married July 17 in the Greenfield courtroom of District Judge James J. Hanley Jr., with Mr. Mejia wearing an oversized black suit while a dozen friends snapped pictures.

They also agreed to work with Ms. Martin on "El Camino," sitting for 10 hours of interviews with the playwright and her creative partner, Michelle Carello.

Ms. Martin hopes to have a full production of the show in the fall of next year.

"The play, it's helping people," Mr. Mejia said. "It shows Americans the [immigration] process."

That process could now be a long one for Mr. Mejia, who will face a 10-year ban on re-entry to the United States. But he and his wife hope to cut that down by applying for a hardship exception when Mrs. Mejia becomes a U.S. citizen.

In the meantime, she plans to go with him to Honduras next month and spend several weeks there.

Mr. Mejia's grandmother died during his time away, and he will live with his mother and study accounting.

"We're going to make it work," he said, looking at Mrs. Mejia with tired eyes.

"I'm going to see him at least once a year," she said.

"Two times," he said.